

The Christian Science Monitor

Congress deadlocked on ways to lower gas prices

JULY 26, 2008

WASHINGTON - With a gallon of gas hovering at \$4 a gallon and energy prices the No. 1 issue on voters' minds, congressional leaders are increasingly deadlocked over what to do. In response, frustrated rank-and-file members on both sides of the aisle are stepping up efforts to find common ground. Two potential solutions fell short on key votes this week. On Thursday, the House rejected a measure that would have released about 70 million barrels of oil from the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve. On Friday, Senate Republicans blocked a move that would have led to a vote on a bill to stop excessive speculation in energy markets.

Both foundered on the same issue: whether to lift a congressional ban on exploration and drilling in protected offshore areas and in the Arctic wilderness.

Republicans are eager to lift the ban and promote more drilling. It's one of only a few GOP issues that appears to be gaining widespread support among voters.

But for Democratic leaders, the issue is politically toxic. Senate and House Democrats in hard-hit states, such as Michigan and Ohio, want to lift the ban. Those representing coastal districts generally oppose it.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says she will not allow a floor vote on offshore drilling. President Bush lifted an executive ban on offshore exploration on the outer continental shelf on July 14 and challenged Congress to lift its own ban.

"What the president would like to do is to have validation for his failed policy. I'm saying that that's not something that will come easily to him," she said in a press briefing on Thursday. She says that the White House and oil companies must first "exhaust other remedies," including drilling onshore in the 68 million acres already open to exploration and drilling.

On the Senate side, majority leader Harry Reid prevented minority Republicans from offering amendments on the "Stop Excessive Energy Speculation" bill, including a proposal to lift the ban on offshore drilling. "Republicans once again have run away from an opportunity to provide a short-term solution to our energy crisis," he said after the vote.

The issue also plays into the presidential campaign.

Sen. Barack Obama, the likely Democratic presidential nominee, opposes offshore drilling in protected areas. Lifting the congressional ban would "merely prolong the failed energy policies we have seen from Washington for 30 years," he said in a statement after Mr. Bush's July 14 order lifting of the executive ban.

Republicans say that a Senate vote on the issue would expose the Democrats' divisions and embarrass Senator Obama. "Senator Reid can't allow a vote that will put Senator Obama in a tough spot," says Don Stewart, a spokesman for Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

With Democratic leaders not allowing Republicans to add amendments to the energy-speculation measure, all but two Republicans voted against limiting debate on the bill Friday, delaying a vote on the bill itself.

With leaders on both sides of the aisle digging in for a long siege on offshore drilling, other lawmakers are reaching across party lines for a fix.

Next Tuesday, a bipartisan working group plans to go over a final draft of a comprehensive energy plan, which includes the lifting of the ban on offshore drilling. The plan locks in 40 percent of royalties from new leases on the outer continental shelf for conservation, research on renewable energy, environmental cleanup, and funding for low-income energy assistance, says David Helfert, a spokesman for Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D) of Hawaii, a cofounder of the working group with Rep. John Peterson (R) of Pennsylvania.

"We are not just talking about alternative energy and renewables, we are paying for them," Mr. Helfert adds. Royalties on leases in areas now covered by a congressional ban are estimated to be \$2.6 trillion over the next 10 years, he says.

"We expect there will be a groundswell of support behind this plan in Republican and Democratic circles, because no one wants to go home in August and be portrayed as the do-nothing Congress," says Patrick Creighton, a spokesman for Representative Peterson.

Rep. Nick Lampson (D) of Texas, who worked with the Democratic leadership on this week's failed bill to tap the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, is now pursuing his own version of an offshore drilling bill. His proposed legislation would dedicate all \$2.6 trillion in expected royalties to research on alternative energy.